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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES CONTINUES TO WORK ON DEMOCRATIC REFORMS

REF: A. COLOMBO 1189

[B](#). COLOMBO 1212

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)
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[1](#). (U) Summary. The Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) is continuing its efforts to institute multi-party democracy and human rights reforms. On July 14, the President announced a massive shift in the Cabinet, with young, progressive Ministers replacing those opposed to reform. The Ambassador visited Male July 20, where he discussed democratic reforms with government officials and members of the opposition party. End summary.

THE NEW FACE OF MALDIVIAN POLITICS: A YOUTHFUL CABINET

[1](#)2. (SBU) The projected reorganization of the President's Cabinet in the Maldives (Reftel A) came about on July 14, when 18 new Ministers were announced. A number of Ministers who were resistant to reform have been replaced, but those former Cabinet Ministers have been asked to serve as Presidential Advisors. Former Government Spokesman (and longtime Embassy contact) Ahmed Shaheed was named as the new Foreign Minister. During the Ambassador's July 20 visit to Male, Shaheed reiterated a commitment to democratic reforms. He said that the real indicator of success will be transparent, free, fair, multi-party elections, with the current Constitution calling for Presidential elections in 2008 and Majlis (Parliamentary) elections in 2009.

[1](#)3. (C) During a meeting with the Ambassador, Foreign Secretary Abdul Hameed Zakariyya noted that four of the new

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Ministers, including those with the portfolios for Education and Planning, are all graduates from the American University of Beirut, where they studied with the help of USAID scholarships in the 1980s. Likewise, a number of other new Ministers are widely reported to be young, Western-educated, and reform-minded. Attorney General Hassan Saeed told the Ambassador that the new cabinet has a high degree of public approval, with commensurately high expectations that the new Ministers will bring about further democratic progress.

PARTY ANIMALS: DEMOCRACY TAKES A FOOTHOLD

[1](#)4. (C) As of July 25, the President's political party is not yet registered, and the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) remains the only official party (Reftel B). In a July 20 meeting with the Ambassador, President Gayoom said that his party had submitted its registration papers to the Home Ministry and is awaiting recognition. In a separate meeting, Attorney General Saeed said that some parties had asked him to extend the deadline for registration. Saeed said that he may reduce the required number of signatures (currently set at 3000, or roughly 1% of the population) and extend the deadline. Saeed told the Ambassador that the number of signatures had initially been set high in order to weed out fringe parties, but he may lower the signature threshold slightly in order to draw dissenters into the political mainstream.

[1](#)5. (C) Both Foreign Minister Shaheed and President Gayoom told the Ambassador that the Maldivian public remains unfamiliar with democratic processes, so civic education is a high priority for the government. The President said that he was seeking assistance from Commonwealth countries, and Shaheed mentioned that the GORM was asking the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva to send an advisor.

REFORMS: A TIME FOR CHANGE

[1](#)6. (C) Saeed outlined a number of imminent reforms. He said a new penal code, including police and armed services acts, is slated for discussion at the next session of parliament (due to begin in December). Labor laws, including those

permitting unions, are also set to go forward in parliament. Furthermore, Saeed is attempting to set up an independent Judicial Commission to oversee the judiciary, newly separated from the executive branch of government. Saeed mentioned that the parliament publishes commentary along with the new laws, and the government tries to provide training for lawyers and judges to help them understand and implement the reforms.

17. (C) In addition, Saeed discussed the Special Majlis, a Parliamentary group that is supposed to work on Constitutional reform. Saeed called the Special Majlis "pathetic" because the members have spent the majority of their time on procedural, rather than substantive issues. According to both Saeed and Shaheed, on July 19, the Special Majlis spent the whole of the day discussing dress codes for women within the context of Islam. Saeed characterized the discussion as sexist in tone. Saeed expressed concern that if the Special Majlis did not produce effective recommendations, the GORM might "steamroll" the group. President Gayoom said that the Special Majlis was acting slowly, but he was hopeful they would create a framework of rules by July 24. As of July 25, the Special Majlis still had not drafted any proposals.

18. (C) Members of the Human Rights Commission have been seeking parliamentary recognition (rather than existence by presidential decree) since the Commission's inception in 2003 (Reftel B). On July 21, the Majlis voted to codify the Human Rights Commission and referred the bill to the legal drafting committee for final preparation. The bill will then go to the President, who can ratify it and sign it into law. Yet according to the Human Rights Commission's Secretary-General Rashida Ali, the Commission has only received an unofficial copy of the current bill from a parliamentarian. Ali is worried that the Majlis has hampered the Commission by removing some of the original bill's text. Ali said the amended Clause 21 prevents the Commission from accessing certain documents, and the elimination of former Clause 22 now prohibits the Commission from investigating human rights abuses if the abuses pertain to a case that is in court.

"THE OPPOSITION WILL CONTINUE TO OPPOSE"

19. (C) According to Attorney General Saeed, "The Opposition will continue to oppose," meaning that the MDP will always find fault with the government, regardless of how much progress the GORM makes. The Ambassador met with the MDP leadership at their new party headquarters in Male. The MDP members have not accepted any of the GORM reforms at face value. Mohammed Nasheed, party Chairperson, insisted that the President's reforms are purely cosmetic and the new Cabinet Ministers were only appointed to offer the GORM more seats in the Special Majlis. Nasheed and his colleagues were adamant that true reform would require President Gayoom to leave, so the MDP's single focus is forcing the President out of power. The Ambassador pointed out the perils of a platform based solely on opposition to an individual and encouraged the MDP to publicize their own specific vision for the future. The MDP members mentioned that if elected, they will try to limit corruption in government.

110. (C) Earlier, MDP International Spokesperson Mohamed Latheef had told poloff he feared that recognition of parties was a hollow gesture that would not be backed by multi-party elections. Nasheed and Ibrahim Ismail, MDP Councilor and Member of Parliament, both told the Ambassador that the MDP enjoys widespread popular support from Maldivian citizens clamoring for immediate elections. Ali Hashim, Vice-Chairperson, informed poloff on July 21 that the MDP is demanding elections within 90 days. MDP leaders said they were trying to refrain their followers but feared trouble holding them back. The Ambassador replied that violent confrontations with the government would threaten all of the reforms.

COMMENT

111. (C) We find that the GORM has made noticeable strides forward in instituting democratic processes. Although a small minority in the government remains resistant to change, a number of officials have both expressed and demonstrated a real commitment to reform. The Cabinet shuffle removed some of the members most resistant to change and brought in some pro-reform faces. While much work remains to be done, we are hopeful that the Maldives will continue to move forward, and perhaps even become an example of peaceful democratization for other Islamic countries to follow. We should continue to look for ways to assist this process. President Gayoom and others have expressed strong interest in having the National Democratic Institute (NDI) or a similar group work in Maldives, perhaps by helping the new political parties learn

how to organize and operate. One danger continues to be an aggressive MDP which appears ready, and perhaps eager, to confront the President.

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